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EXPLORING BRAND CONFUSION THROUGH HOTEL ADVERTS

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Brand confusion takes place when a person views an advertisement for a particular brand as a communication about a different brand. The purpose of this study is to investigate the problem of brand confusion in advertising and more specifically, to study into more depth some of the parameters that lead to brand confusion in print advertising of international hotel-chains. This study was conducted in 127 men and women, and based on 17 international hotel-chain advertisements. Respondents were selected through quota sampling, using age and education as variables. Consumer characteristics and the dependent variable 'brand confusion' were measured through a questionnaire completed during interview, while print advertisements were presented followed by a set of questions containing measures of the attitude towards the advertisement. The purpose of this study was to explore the issue of brand confusion in advertising of international hotel chains, a topic never surveyed in the past. This study was limited to a specific product category (international hotel chains), hence practical implications should be formulated with caution. Nevertheless, the following suggestions seem to be valid: The affective reaction to hotel advertisement is very important; advertisement likeability leads to less hotel brand confusion; hotel advertisements should be distinctive and not too information dense; building awareness, loyalty and involvement reduce brand confusion.

Keywords: *hotel branding, advertising, promotion, hospitality marketing*

JEL Classification: L83, M1, O1

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INTRODUCTION

Advertising is intended to stimulate selective demand for the advertiser's brand, but often also stimulates primary demand for the product category in general. Far worse than this problem is the phenomenon of brand confusion that potentially causes advertising to stimulate selective demand for competing brands instead of the advertiser's brand. Misattribution by consumers can be an important reason for advertising ineffectiveness. When consumers perceive an advertisement for a certain brand as promoting another, it is not only ineffective, but even counterproductive (Poiesz and Verhallen, 1989): it produces an effect that the advertiser specially wants to avoid. Therefore, brand confusion is a phenomenon that should receive the researchers' continuous attention, and measures of brand confusion should be added to the more conventional advertisement effectiveness measures (Poiesz and Verhallen, 1989).

Brand confusion takes place when a recipient views a commercial communication for brand X as a communication about a different brand Y (Poiesz and Verhallen, 1989; Christou, 2005, 2010). Not only the brand name, but on a more general level also the product or service displayed in the advertising message may be the subject of confusion, e.g. an advertisement by a hotel resort might be interpreted by the consumer as an advertisement for a tourist destination. At the lowest level, confusion can take place with regard to particular message components, for example between slogans (Poiesz and Verhallen, 1989). The present study is limited to brand confusion; correct identification and confusion are not perfectly related.

Depending upon whose position is taken, brand confusion can be 'positive' or 'negative' (Häcker and Verhallen, 1988; Christou, 2011a). 'Negative' brand confusion refers to the extent to which the reference brand is confused with other brands; i.e. the degree to which the reference brand advertises for its competitors. 'Positive' brand confusion refers to the degree to which other brand advertisements are confused with the brand at issue; i.e. is the degree to which competitors advertise for the brand at issue. 'Positive' brand confusion is not necessarily an advantage for a brand. It may be a threat to a clear positioning and image building strategy if a company's brand name is incorrectly attributed to a competitor's advertising message.

Taking into account that tourism products may be considered as brands, the purpose of this study is to investigate the problem of brand confusion in advertising and more specifically, to study into more depth some of the parameters that lead to brand confusion in print advertising of international hotel-chains.

HOTEL BRANDING AND BRAND CONFUSION

Based on previous research, three categories of parameters that have an impact on brand confusion in destinations' advertising can be identified, i.e. product category related factors, consumer characteristics and message characteristics.

Tourism and hospitality products are becoming more and more objectively similar with respect to their functionality and presentation (Poiesz and Verhallen, 1989). In an increasingly cluttered marketplace, the *reduced inter-brand differences* necessitate the use of advertising to create a unique and recognizable brand image (Poiesz and Verhallen, 1989). This leads to an overload of stimuli which, in turn, may lead to brand confusion.

Ha (1996) refers to the degree of similarity and proximity of advertisements as a dimension of the advertising clutter. The *degree of overall similarity of strategy* (DOSS) seems to have increased over time as far as the information content is concerned, although tourism destination ads tend to become more diverse as to their emotional content (De Pelsmacker and Geuens, 1997; Farmaki, 2012). Successful advertising techniques get imitated and waves of similar advertising arise. It can be expected that a higher DOSS leads to more brand confusion.

Brand confusion can also be caused by *wilful brand imitation*. In this case consumers may buy the imitator brand thinking it is the original (Ward and Loken, 1986). The aim of the creators of imitator brands is to position their product next to the better known brand (Foxman and Muehling, 1990); this is often the strategy adopted by new – not well known – mass tourism destinations. The *degree of competition in the product category* or, in other words, the number of competing brands in a product category and the similarity of their market shares, may also lead to more brand confusion (De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh, 1998; Christou, 2006).

A consumer's *attitude towards advertising in general* will presumably affect his recognition of brands in print advertisements. Someone who is very negative about advertising in general is likely to be more irritated by individual advertisements and, therefore, block out most of the advertising messages targeted at him. Indeed, irritation leads to less recall, especially in advertising haters (De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 1998b). Also, the *attitude towards the advertisement* (Aad) may play an important role. Especially in the case of low involvement products or consumers (as is often the case for mass tourism tour operator packages), a positive attitude towards the advertisement may lead to more interest in the message and the brand, and eventually a more positive attitude towards the brand (Batra and Ray, 1986). De Pelsmacker *et al.* (1998b) concluded that a more positive Aad was related with less brand confusion. Consumers who have a high personal *involvement* (Zaichkowsky, 1985; Ihamaki, 2012) in a product category possess a more fully developed knowledge structure with respect to brands in the category, and are therefore less likely to be confused (Foxman and Muehling, 1990).

The more familiar consumers are with the various brand offerings within a product class (for example, if they have visited already various mass tourism destinations in different countries), the more likely they can be expected to be able to make distinctions among brands, thereby reducing the likelihood of confusion. *Product category familiarity*, a major component of consumer knowledge, has been defined as the number of product related experiences that have been accumulated by the consumer (Jacoby *et al.*, 1986; Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Christou & Kassianidis, 2002; Christou, 2011b). Cumulated advertising exposure, information search, salesperson interactions, choice, decision making, purchase and ultimately product usage are encapsulated in the consumer's memory and build-up product class and brand experience. *Brand salience*, i.e. brand awareness, brand loyalty, and use of a particular brand, may influence brand confusion. For instance, brand awareness has been found to be statistically significant for discriminating between consumers who confuse and consumers who do not confuse brands (Foxman and Muehling, 1990). The *degree of media use* may be a factor of importance, since consumers that read more magazines or newspapers or watch more television, will be more frequently exposed to advertisements.

Advertisers use a large number of techniques to convey their message and to influence the consumer's ability and motivation to process the information offered (De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 1998a; Sigala & Christou, 2003, 2014; Lyons & Branston, 2006; Christou and Nella, 2010, 2016; Nella & Christou, 2014, 2016; Christou, 2004, 2013; Chatzigeorgiou & Christou, 2016). Advertisements may differ in emotional and informational content, as well as in format or creative strategy used. As far as *emotional content* is concerned, advertisers use techniques such as humour, eroticism, warmth, and provocation to draw the consumer's attention. Very often, though, the capacity of these messages to draw the attention distracts the consumer, and leads to lower brand recall (Gelb and Zinkhan, 1986; Severn *et al.*, 1990). *Information content* refers to characteristics such as the number and type of selling arguments used (Abernathy and Franke, 1996; Gretzel *et al.*, 2012), the degree of repetition of the arguments, the number of times the brand name is shown or mentioned and, more generally, the type of motivation used, e.g. informational or transformational (Rossiter and Percy, 1997). Although the richness of information may stimulate elaborate processing during exposure, and as a result lead to more attention and less confusion (Poiesz and Verhallen, 1989; Christou *et al.*, 2004), information dense advertisements also lead to more irritation (De Pelsmacker and Van Den Bergh, 1998), and consequently may induce more confusion. *Format characteristics* refer to the use of human models, product-in-use pictures, headlines, baselines, logos, large or small body copy or pictures, colours and typography; for instance, advertisements with pictures and advertisements in which a product in use is shown, result in less confusion. De Pelsmacker and Van den Bergh (1998) also conclude that the headline and the picture of the product were two of the most important determining factors of absence of confusion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of a number of consumer characteristics on brand confusion, more specifically for international hotel chains. Brand confusion is operationalized as a consumer's false identification of a brand name (in our case this is the name of the hotel chain) when an advertisement is presented with the brand name excluded from the message.

A total of 54 print advertisements, pertaining to 17 different hotel chains, were used as stimuli. It involved advertisements that were published in several magazines in the six months preceding the survey. The product category investigated (hotels), was selected because of the substantial amount of print advertisements available during that period of time, the diversity of brands advertised, as well as the publication frequency. The only problem is that the advertising stimuli in this product category were very similar in nature, resulting in a very high general degree of brand confusion.

The advertisements were presented to a representative sample of 127 persons in Greece, users of the product category under investigation (i.e., they all had visited hotel chains in the past, though not necessarily all the hotels represented at the advertisements of the study). Respondents were aged between 20 and 60, and were selected following a quota sampling procedure, using age and education level as quota variables. As part of a larger survey, participants were personally interviewed in cooperation with a professional marketing research agency in September of 2013. All respondents were recruited randomly until a quota sample of 127 was reached.

Consumer characteristics and the dependent variable '*brand confusion*' were measured by means of a questionnaire completed during the personal interview. The questionnaire was composed of two parts. A first part provided measures of the attitude towards advertising in general, magazine reading behaviour, involvement with the product category under investigation, spontaneous destination brand name recall for the chosen product category, brand loyalty, and product category familiarity measured as the extent of product use (visitation to different hotels) and the number of brands used regularly (number of hotels visited). Demographic information, including age, education level and profession, was also collected at this stage. The second part of the survey involved the actual testing of the advertisements; each respondent was assigned twenty-four advertisements. The advertisements were presented one by one, each time followed by a set of questions containing measures of the attitude towards the advertisement (11 items based on Madden *et al.*, 1988; Olney *et al.*, 1991 and Cho and Stout, 1993: likable, interesting, convincing, appealing, easy to forget, effective, irritating, believable, clear, informative, distinctive) and recognition of the advertisement. Participants were also asked to identify the brand (destination) each advertisement referred to ('*attribution*'). In order to control for a possible presentation bias, separate groups of participants viewed the advertisements in different orders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, brand confusion scores were found to be discomfortingly high: from a total of 3216 observations, in 1286 cases (40%) respondents admit not to know what brand is advertised. For the following analyses these observations are excluded. Since not knowing which brand is advertised is not considered to be real confusion, these cases are irrelevant for further analyses. Of the remaining 1930 observations, in which case the respondents think they know which brand is advertised, 43% actually confuse brands and attribute a wrong brand to the advertisement. Overall, in only 1061 (33%) of all observations the advertised brand is correctly identified.

Two dimensions of the *attitude towards advertising in general* were measured: to what extent the subjects think advertising in general is irritating or fascinating, and to what extent they believe advertising in general contains useful information or not. Respondents who confused brands, as compared to participants that attributed brands correctly, evaluated advertising to be more irritating (3.61 versus 3.18, *t*-test, $p = 0.001$), but did not hold a different opinion on the information content of advertising. It can be assumed that the level of irritation served as a 'gatekeeper' for further processing of the advertising message.

Besides the effect of the attitude towards advertisements in general, also the impact of the *attitude towards each individual advertisement (Aad)* was assessed. This measure was a characteristic of the stimulus as judged by the respondents. Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation on the 11 items of the Aad scale used showed three dimensions, explaining 67.3% of the variance: affective reaction, composed of the items 'likeable' and 'appealing' (summed); distinctiveness, the item 'different from other advertisements'; and informativeness, the item 'one learns something from this advertisement'. The criteria used to define the Aad components were: variables should load more than 0.70 on one factor and less than 0.35 on the others, and correlations between variables loading on the same factor should amount to more than 0.70, while the correlations between variables of different factors should be less than 0.30.

Table 1: Hotel brand confusion & attitudes towards the advertisement

	Participants confusing brands*	Participants correctly attributing brands*	Significance level t-test
Attitude towards advertising - irritation level	3.61	3.18	$P = 0.001$
Affective reaction	3.79	4.73	$P < 0.001$
Distinctiveness	4.18	4.81	$P = 0.030$
Informativeness	2.21	2.84	$P = 0.268$

* Average scores on 7-point Likert scales

Relating brand confusion to what participants held of the advertisement revealed that respondents who confuse the brand as opposed to those who correctly identify the brand, rate the affective Aad-dimension, as well as the distinctive dimension significantly lower (Table 1). In other words, the extent to which consumers perceive the advertisement as attractive and as distinct from other advertisements is inversely related with brand confusion. Although the direction of the causality cannot be revealed in this study, it seems more plausible that the relation flowed from advertisements responses to brand confusion and not from brand confusion to the attitude towards the advertisement. The reason for this is that people who did not know which hotel brand was advertised were excluded from the analysis, eliminating the possibility that one evaluated the advertisement unfavourably simply because he/she did not know the advertised hotel. It has to be added, though, that the extent to which the respondents felt certain they attributed the right brand, was not measured.

As to the effect of the format of the advertisements, significantly more people confuse hotel brands when the advertisements contain human characters (59%) than when they do not (30%) ($\chi^2, p = 0.004$). A plausible explanation for this the nature of the product category investigated with respect to the think-feel dimension of the Foote, Cone and Belding (FCB) classification of products and services. According to this symbolic-utilitarian framework (Rathford, 1987; Sigala & Christou, 2002; Sigala et al., 2012; Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2016, 2019), hotels may be classified as purely symbolic, real 'experience or feel' products, as a result of which consumers are attracted to more affective and emotional formats. All in all, the affective reaction of respondents towards advertising in general and towards specific advertisements in particular appears to be strongly related to brand confusion, although certain differences can be observed between different hotels' advertisements.

As to the information component of Aad, no difference was observed between participants who confuse and do not confuse hotel brands. The number of information cues present in the advertisements varied between 5 and 11, leading to brand confusion (2.28 versus 1.96; t -test $p < 0.001$). Although no significant effect of the perception of informativeness of the advertisement (as a component of Aad) was found, on the basis of these results it may be concluded that information overload in advertising leads to higher levels of confusion. This is confirmed by the fact that the copy of advertisements leading to brand confusion counted more words than their non-confused counterparts (267 versus 141, t -test $p < 0.001$). The density of the copy (the number of words divided by the size of the copy) was also larger for advertisements leading to brand confusion (1.68 versus 0.86, t -test $p < 0.001$). In Table 2 the effects of a number of other consumer characteristics on brand confusion are shown. Consistent with the findings of Foxman and Muehling (1990), *highly involved* respondents showed lower levels of destination brand confusion than low involvement consumers.

The number of respondents confusing brands does not differ for light and heavy product category users, although the difference points in the expected direction. As expected, highly brand loyal consumers confused destination brands more often than variety seekers. Similarly, respondents mentioning more brands in use were confused to the same extent as those who mentioned fewer brands. Hence, *product category familiarity* does not seem to influence hotel brand confusion. *Destination brand salience* was measured as the level of brand awareness and brand loyalty. As expected, *brand awareness* leads to lower levels of confusion. However, people that are top-of-mind aware of hotel brands were confused to the same extent as consumers that were not top-of-mind aware of the brands. Brand loyalty, as measured by distinguishing respondents who tick one particular brand as compared to those who tick the option 'miscellaneous destination brands' when asked what destination they most frequently visit, had a significant impact on brand confusion in the sense that more loyal customers seem to confuse brands than their 'variety seeking' counterparts (46.7% versus 30.2%, $p = 0.031$).

Table 2: Hotel brand confusion & respondent characteristics

		Confusion level	Significance level
Brand awareness:	<i>Non-top-of-mind aware</i>	49.3	$\chi^2, p = 0.015$
	<i>Top-of-mind aware</i>	22.7	
Brand loyalty	<i>Loyal customers</i>	46.7	$\chi^2, p = 0.031$
	<i>Variety seekers</i>	30.2	
Involvement:	<i>High involvement</i>	40.4	$\chi^2, p = 0.003$
	<i>Low involvement</i>	52.0	
Usage frequency:	<i>Heavy users</i>	41.3	

	<i>Light users</i>	44.9	$\chi^2, p = 0.084$
Age:	<i>Under 40</i>	37.9	$\chi^2, p = 0.002$
	<i>Over 40</i>	54.0	
Perceived exposure:	<i>Not seen it</i>	54.0	$\chi^2, p < 0.001$
	<i>Seen it a few times</i>	40.8	
	<i>Seen it several times</i>	37.6	

Magazine readership was expected to have an impact on the *perceived frequency of previous exposure* to the advertisements, and therefore on brand confusion. Indeed, the more magazines participants read, the more they claimed to have seen the advertisements several times (20.2%, 26.8% and 32.5% for reading one, two and more than two magazines respectively, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the fact that respondents thought they had seen the advertisement before significantly lowered the likelihood of destination brand confusion (Table 2). A remarkable finding is that claiming to have seen the advertisement only a few as opposed to several times, does not seem to affect brand confusion at all. One might be tempted to conclude that this lends support to the idea of Jones (1995) that one exposure might be enough, and that frequency of exposure is not so important. On the other hand, it could be that respondents only remembered having seen the hotel advertisement, but had no idea how many times they were exposed to it.

As far as the demographic characteristics of the respondents are concerned, neither education level nor profession had a significant impact on brand confusion. Age seemed to have a significant effect on brand confusion in the sense that more respondents over 40 confuse brands than their younger counterparts (54% versus 37.9%, $\chi^2, p = 0.002$). A possible explanation that the former were less involved in the product categories investigated has to be rejected. As a matter of fact, respondents over 40 actually appeared more involved (5.73 versus 5.11, t -test $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, they can be assumed to have more brand experience, since they mention to use the products more often (56.0% versus 31.4% are heavy users, $\chi^2, p = 0.040$). A possible explanation for the fact that more people over 40 confused brands may be that they are more loyal to particular hotel brands, and as a consequence, pay less attention to other brands. Significantly more respondents aged over 40 as compared to the younger ones, showed brand loyalty (65.0% versus 31.8%, $p < 0.001$), lending support to the suggestion that a high level of destination brand loyalty is a key factor in the higher brand confusion observed in people older than 40, that counterbalances the effects of more product usage, more product involvement and more magazine reading.

FEEDBACK AND CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that hotel brand salience, the level of product category involvement, the degree of perceived exposure (as a result of the difference in magazine readership), the general affective attitude towards advertising, the likeability and distinctiveness of the advertisement, the degree of information overload, and to a certain extent the age of the respondent, are the main consumer-related explanatory parameters of brand confusion for hotel chains.

Consumers most vulnerable to hotel brand confusion generally have lower levels of product category involvement, brand awareness and brand loyalty. They have a more negative general attitude towards advertising, and are more easily irritated by it. If they do not like a particular advertisement, or they think it is not distinctive enough, they are more likely to be confused by it. Information overload advertisements tend to lead to more brand confusion. People over 40 appear to be more vulnerable to brand confusion than their younger counterparts. Other socio-demographic characteristics do not appear to have an impact on hotel brand confusion.

This study was limited to a specific product category (hotel chain brands). Therefore, practical implications should be formulated with caution. Nevertheless, the following suggestions seem to be valid: the affective reaction to tourism advertisement is very important; advertisement likeability leads to less hotel brand confusion; tourism advertisements should also be distinctive and not too information dense; and, building awareness, loyalty and involvement reduce destination brand confusion.

However, the present study has a number of limitations that are likely to affect the generalizability of the results obtained. It can be suggested that future research in hospitality marketing and branding includes more advertisements (and in a variety of formats – not just print ads), more diversified stimuli, and certainly more product categories from different types of hotels. This would also enable the investigation of product category and message related parameters. Finally, in order to investigate further hotel chain advertising campaign parameters a longitudinal approach may also be more appropriate.

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